

**Interview With:** Jack and Janis Ellis  
**Interview Date:** April 3, 1998  
**Interview Place:** Mr. & Mrs. Ellis' home in Morehead, KY  
**Interviewer:** Kim Cox  
**Interviewees:** Jack Ellis and his wife Janis Ellis

000-017

**Kim Cox:** My name is Kim Cox and I'm at the home of Jack Ellis at 550 Sun Street in Morehead, Kentucky and it's April 3, 1998. Mr. Ellis would like to tell me about the day of the flood.

**Jack Ellis:** Ah, well, as everyone knows, I'm sure, in this project, it was July 3 rd, the night of ah, July the 3 rd, or 4 th, July the 4 th, 1939. And ah, there was a circus here in town on that day, and most of the people went to the circus that night, I didn't go. But the afternoon of the flood, before the flood came I was playing down here by the railroad in off of West First Street, the very end of West First Street, there was a vacant lot in there and we were playing baseball, several of us, 10, 12, 13, 14 year old kids. And we played there and, ah, there was a little boy, ah, a little older than I am, that lived just across the railroad, the railroad, of course, ran parallel with First Street, just across the railroad he lived over there, so when we got through playing baseball, why all of us went home. I went to bed that night, we had company here from Florida, my cousin and grandmother were here, I remember, and I was sleeping on the floor.

017-047

**Kim Cox:** Where,, where did you live?

**Jack Ellis:** We lived, that's good, we lived down here on West U.S. 60 just before you turn to go out 519 going toward West Liberty going across the railroad tracks (Mrs. Ellis coughs) we lived down here on West U.S. 60 and, ah, so I guess about, it was thunderin and lightening when I went to bed and went to sleep, but I was awoken about 2 o'clock in the morning by the shrill whistle of a train, and my mother and dad were up saying, you know, "something is wrong!" And this train was sitting almost behind my house with the light shining up the railroad track, it was a freight train, and the light was shining up the track and it was just whistling, just constantly on its whistle, you know, the train whistle there. And so, we got up and went out and the lightening was just flashing, it didn't really seem to be raining that hard here. But the lightening was flashing, just almost continuously and you could see out, and you could see the water out when you went out of my back porch, the water was up about almost to our back yard, and it was from hill to hill, ah, down here on West U.S. 60 before you go around Brady Curve. It was from hill to hill over there and the train was, was making a lot of noise, trying to alert the people, and getting the people, ah, aware that something was wrong, and I can see as the lightening was flashing, I can see houses floating down, you know, just, ah, down about where the railroad track was, on each side of the railroad track really, and houses were floating down, I could see people up on top of the houses. One man was standing up there with a arm around a chimney that was still sticking up through the roof of the house and everybody was screaming and yelling, hollering, "Help!", "Help!", "Help!", you know it's still ringing, you know, "Help!", "Help!", it

was just continuously, then you would see another house go down. Sometimes a house would hit a tree and kinda' break up, but you could see this as the lightening was flashing. So, ah, ah, I watched it there, and, ah, to almost daylight, then I went on back to bed and slept a little while, ah, so that's how I spent the night of the flood looking and watching the houses float down the stream, which was just, there was no stream there, of course, float down the valley that had been washed out up the stream there somewhere.

047-055

**Kim Cox:** How close did it actually get to your house:

**Jack Ellis:** It was in the back yard.

**Kim Cox:** In the backyard?

**Jack Ellis:** We were right on U.S. 60 and it's kinda' high. That part of US 60 is high. Up in the middle of town it was over U.S. 60, up here, about where the post office is, except it would be up on U.S. 60, as you go down to where 32 is now, going up Old 60, I'm talking about, going down 32 water was all in there and you, people were swimming, and had put their boats in the water there that morning and really after daylight they had they were putting their boats in there too, going out trying to rescue people that were clinging to trees and holding on to trees that they had survived.

055-103

**Kim Cox:** What ah, What happened the next day I mean as far as....

**Jack Ellis:** Well the next day of course, as a twelve year old kid, and it was along about noon and the water begin to subside and there was mud, of course everywhere and houses were strone, the bridge at the railroad bridge at Clearfield over there washed out, I don't think the bridge across the highway that goes over to Clearfield washed out, but the railroad bridge did wash out, so, ah, but the next day there were looking for bodies and looking for survivors, hoping to find survivors. And I was tagging along behind them that afternoon looking for and wading through the mud looking for survivors and there was driftwood down there just around Brady Curve they found this boy that I had played baseball with the night before, now I don't think I even remember the boy's name, but I remember I guess that's about the first really dead person I ever saw, especially one that was drown, it's not a very pretty sight at all. But, ah, the next day I was just roaming around with them. Ah...

**Kim Cox:** "Them", as in like rescue workers?

**Jack Ellis:** Well, just local citizens.

**Kim Cox:** Just local people?



**Jack Ellis:** We didn't have such thing as a rescue, ah, team, firemen, I'm sure were involved in it, but these were neighbors. Also so, ah, a incident my Uncle, who at that time was about 16 years old, and he and his 16 year old friend, went to the carnival, it was the circus.

**Janis Ellis:** No, it was a carnival.

**Jack Ellis:** Carnival, alright it was a carnival, went to the carnival, and ah, they ah, well he was just going to stay all night with this friend, Wayne Amburgey, Norton Early, was my uncle. Wayne Amburgey lived just here where you go down over to Clearfield, down on the right before you cross Triplett there was a house down in there, ah, now it would be out where that new gas station is at, and he was going to stay all night with this friend, and he said, they got in about midnight and went in and went to bed, and there was lightening continuously and thundering and pouring the rain, so, my cousin, ah my uncle said, ah, "I believe I better get up and go home," he said, "I'm afraid my mother will really be worried about me." So he said he got up and went home, and he lived across Triplett creek and up on Clearfield Hill and he said it's the only time in his life, you know, like 2 o'clock in the morning, he could walk and it was just as bright as day because the lightening was just continuously shining. So he went home and went in and went to bed, and oh, about 2:30 or something like that (Mrs. Ellis clears throat) his mother woke him up with this train, you know, blowing, whistle blowing there, and, ah, so, he, they knew something was wrong, well this house where he would have stayed washed off, completely left, washed off it's foundation and Wayne, the 16 year old, broke a window out and climbed out and swam to a tree and climbed up in a tree, and survived. His mother and two younger sisters all three drowned there, so, Wayne had always told Norton, he said "Norton, if you would have stayed with me that night we might have saved my mother and my sisters." and Norton said, "Yes, and we might have all drowned." Ah, that was, you know, one, there were so many tragedies like that, one family, of five people, I don't remember their names, it can be documented in the paper, one family of five drowned over there, the whole family, none of them survived. I think there was 26 people that drowned in the flood. People in cars down here around Brady curve, people drowned in cars there.

103-126

**Kim Cox:** Ah, what did you feel, ah, I know you were only twelve at the time, that you were talking about afterwards, like the next day in the communities, did they seem to pull together.

**Jack Ellis:** Well, there this was there ( Mr. Ellis clears throat) I think there was only one undertaker in Morehead at that time, one main undertaker, Lane Funeral Home, and my grandfather who lived way out in the country, back in those days people out in the country didn't even get an undertaker when someone died. They would call somebody in the neighborhood, and it happened to be my grandfather over in that area of the country, way out in the country, and he'd come and help prepare the bodies for burial. Well he was in town walking up the street in front of Clark Lane, who was the undertaker then, and Clark Lane came out, it was about 10 o'clock in the morning, granddad said, and Clark said, "John, have you got a strong stomach?"

And he (the granddad) said "Well, I think I have, yea."

He (Clark Lane) said, " Well I've got to have some help. All these bodies in here and it's hot as it can be," you know, they were just bringing them in as fast as they could find them there, he said, " I've got to have some help with these bodies. Can you come in and help me?"

He said, " I sure can." So, he went in, he had never done "that" kind of work, but he'd prepared bodies for burial, he said he worked till midnight helping, yes, so everybody helped. But there was do much devastation, it's so difficult to even imagine. The streets, the main streets where the old post office is, ah, water was probably over your head in there, people were having to swim up through there, that's about all (turns to his wife) You can tell them about your, your cousin, Billy.

126-159

**Janis Ellis:** Well I'll just start from the little what I know. I was probably ten and a half, and we...

**Jack Ellis:** Now you know how far apart we are (laughter)

**Janis Ellis:** And, ah, we lived in a house behind the Wesley Foundation, on tenth no, on second street, and, ah, we, ah, like you said ( pointing toward Mr. Ellis) I had been to the carnival, too, everybody went to the carnival that night, and we were remodeling our house and we didn't have any window shades or curtains up, cause we were in the process of remodeling and lightening was so fierce, it was brilliant, I never seen lightening, I don't think, like that since, it was constant and so we couldn't sleep, so we were just sort of, you know, my parents and I, we were just sort of talking and all the sudden we had this, ah, we thought there was something strange going on, we didn't know what it was, and ah, we heard someone knock, beating on our back door and it was my cousin who lived right across the deepest part of the flood was, so she had someway gotten out and came to town and was beating on the door saying we need help, we need help and so we got up and when we walked out on my back porch, why we could hear the same sounds and sights that he saw, you know, with, ah, the screaming and screaming, because it came up so suddenly, they called it a cloudburst, cause it just came up, you know, just mountains of water all at once. And, ah, so I guess, I think my dad must have gone on, you know, to try to see what he could do, and ah, I don't remember much till the next day, ah, my aunt and uncle's house was totally washed off, they had just built a new home, it was just totally destroyed, and ah, I remember them bringing their furniture up to our back yard, trying to get the mud and everything washed off, and then my dad took me to town the next day, and ah, there was another funeral home it was called Ferguson's, it's down where the Caesar's Pizza kinda is now, and ah, so daddy took me down there, and then, that's a sight that I just always remember because there were these children and all these bodies in the yard or laying up on boxes, you know, just pulled out, mud all over them and everything, and ah, so I had nightmares for nights after that, my mother just couldn't hardly forgive my daddy for taking me down there. But, ah, that's just some of the main things I remember...

159-169

**Kim Cox:** did your cousin's family all make it out?



**Janis Ellis:** Ah, the grandmother was drowned, and then this cousin he (her husband, Mr. Ellis) was talking about, he was quite an athlete, and he was on the swimming team at the university and he lived a Clearfield and he had, ah, some family or friends that he wanted to get to on Clearfield, so he tried to swim from, I don't know where over at Clearfield, probably over around the post office or something, and tried to swim because he didn't have a boat or anything, and he, I guess got all through town but he was just, well he had come through barbed wire and he was just cut all to pieces by the time he got up here, you know, but I think he was able to help some people.

169-197

**Jack Ellis:** The ah, one of the stories that I was told, by a fella' by the name of Jim Markwell , Jim Markwell used to run the Kentucky Electric and Utilities here and it was situated about where Old Town is, that's where the electric company was and where they had electricity there, and when, of course, the storm came the lights and power went off in Morehead, nobody had power, so he had to go see and try to get the power restored, and if you know where Old Town is over there, he lived down past me on U.S. 60, he came up and went down and walked the railroad track, walked the railroad tracks, then went over there where the old power plant was to try to see if he could restore the power. He wasn't able to restore the power and the water was coming up, he could see the water coming up, so, he started to leave and walking down the railroad and he said that he heard a roar, you know, it just sounded almost like a train, and ah, but the train hadn't gotten there yet, this was before the train had gotten there I was telling you about. Said he heard a roar and he looked around and the lightening flashing and he could see a wall of water about 6 foot high from hill to hill coming just like a wave behind him, and of course, he said he started running, but the water caught him, and then just picked him up, just like a toothpick and he probably weighed 300 pounds. Then he said, he was swimming, trying to swim there, then another wall of water came about the same and lifted him up, then he said the third wall of water came later on, that's what brought the houses and everything and, said, ah, he, ah, got on this house, the house was floating down, and he grabbed a hold of this house and climbed upon the roof and got up there, and said, there was this big hog up there on this roof (laughter) and said he survived by staying on top of that house that washed on down and lodged and didn't break apart. But that's the way the water supposedly came up, in waves, like that, which is unbelievable, I don't know if anybody could explain it or not.

197-208

**Kim Cox:** I couldn't imagine it myself, I really couldn't.

**Janis Ellis:** One family I heard about they put their three little children in a big old wash tub and the children survived but I think the parents drown.

**Jack Ellis:** I think it was a wooden tub

**Janis Ellis:** No

**Jack Ellis:** It wasn't?

**Janis Ellis:** I think it was a galvanized wash tub, and also the (clears throat) excuse me, carnival, I don't think they have carnivals now, but you know, we had, ah, all the rides, and then they had all these side shows with just different, ah...

**Jack Ellis:** snakes, and monkeys, and camels, and...

**Janis Ellis:** Yea, and animals, and, of course, hootchy-cootchy shows and all that, you know, but the snakes, and all the animals all got out, of course, so that was one of the things that everybody really had to be concerned about, finding snakes in your house or whatever.

208-241

**Kim Cox:** Well, one of the things (clears throat) in reading about this they talked a lot about the Red Cross coming in to bring relieve, the CCC or the 3 C's were involved in working with the community, ah, how long did it feel like or did it seem to you that the community seemed to come back to some kind of normal routine, I mean, as far, how long did clean up take?

**Jack Ellis:** Well it seemed to go on all summer long, ah, you know, the cleaning up situation, it was mud, you know, it was in the houses and on the streets, it seems to me like it took awhile, they got the streets and everything going in just a day or two, but, ah, clean-up it seems to me like was all cleaned up for maybe a year. But most things were back to normal by the end of summer.

**Kim Cox:** How did people, like, build back their homes or did it seem like a lot of people went back?

**Jack Ellis:** No, I don't believe very many people went back, not like you see in the floods today out west where they day, "We're going back." Well the reason they go back now is because the government, FEMA comes in and gives them all this money and helps them to build back, there was no such thing then. And you know you mentioned the Red Cross coming in here. I, I just don't remember much about the Red Cross and I'm inclined to believe maybe it was kind of late. Not a great deal of help at the early part, now later on I'm sure, maybe after a week or two it was, but I'm not talking about two or three days.

**Kim Cox:** Do you recall, like, any businesses that the flood took that didn't come back, or I know at 12 and 10, those probably didn't seem like a big deal?

**Jack Ellis:** Well, I'm trying to think of the old hotel. Procter's Hotel down there?

**Kim Cox:** Now was that the one that supposedly burned like the day before the flood?

**Jack Ellis:** No, this now, it burned, it burned, it would have been several years after the flood. But I don't think it ever opened up again.



242-254

**Janis Ellis:** What about that, ah, Morehead wood mill?

**Jack Ellis:** Well, they did, they built, they lost a lot of lumber. I always heard the story of a woman who was, you know, how they stack lumber, along, you know, like that, and cross it then stack it up real high, [made a stacking motion with his hands] that a woman got to one of these stacks of lumber and thought she was safe, and the water started washing the levels out underneath, and slowly, you know, it would drop, wash out a stack of lumber underneath, you know, then the next stack, then that lumber kept coming out into the water so she eventually drowned, and she was screaming for someone to come and help her and they didn't have any boats, the current was so swift, that she, ah, didn't make it out.

254-265

**Kim Cox:** So really, as far as coming back to normal I guess it was more just a community effort?

**Jack Ellis:** Yea, we all, everybody was, was ah, cooperating, I remember, of course, the thing is a twelve years old, back in those days you paid a, there were no plastic bottles, or, everything was glass, milk, pop bottles, and you paid a deposit on those bottles. A nickel, and a nickel was a lot of money, and I know all summer long I would go down where the flood had been down on the streets, down US 60 and down the railroads, and I could pick up bottles, make pretty good on a Saturday, you know, take the bottles and have to wash the mud all out of them and clean them up.

265-270

**Kim Cox:** As far as, you were talking about having nightmares from it, and so on, does it, does it still bother you now, or like rain or big storms, did it seem to bother you (clears throat) for a very long time after that?

**Janis Ellis:** Not, not for me, not too long, I don't know about everybody else.

270-277

**Jack Ellis:** The screaming, the screaming of people who are mortally, ah, know that they're dying. The hoarseness, and they'd get do hoarse and they couldn't, and you'd know they were in a tree top, or you'd know they were somewhere over there, and just the screaming and mortal fear and terror is something that's always stayed with me. I've never forgotten it.

277-287

**Janis Ellis:** I guess the scene at the funeral home is what stayed with me.

**Kim Cox:** Did you have any friends or relatives die in the flood?

**Jack Ellis:** Jesse's mother ( Mrs. Ellis' counsin's grandmother) was the closest one.

**Kim Cox:** When you had said that your cousin came to the door, so that was the first that your family knew about the flood going on?

**Janis Ellis:** Yea.

**Kim Cox:** You were far enough away. Did it get to your house?

**Janis Ellis:** No, we were blocked by main street, blocked off.

287-309

**Kim Cox:** Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

**Jack Ellis:** Well, I had a cousin who lived over Clearfield, not far from where the Clearfield school is, down toward the creek, on that side of the creek, and, ah, my uncle and aunt, and my cousin lived there. And this cousin of mine that was here from Florida, we were similiar, both the same age, my cousin, that was here from Florida, he just worried all night long about Don, who was over, living over there, you know, he was just afraid he was drown, and we all were because it was right in the middle of the widest part, the worst part of the flood plain area, that this flood was spreading out there, but the house stayed and it didn't wash away, because there was a huge tree just in the right place there that broke the current and it would split and go around, they had to go up, they first went up into the attic, but then the water got all the way up in the attic, he cut a hole in the roof and went up through the roof and stayed out on top of the roof that night he and his family there, that's where they stayed, but he said that tree was all that saved them, if that tree hadn't been there they all would have eventually died.

**Kim Cox:** That's all that saved this family?

**Jack Ellis:** That tree saved their lives, they all would have died.

309-331

**Kim Cox:** Do you recall anything (clears throat) as far as, like, ah, I guess the psychological trauma of all of it, do you recall back then did they have anybody come in, as far as, anybody to counsel or to work with kids or were people just more or less...

**Jack and Janis Ellis (Both):** You were on your own, best you could do, put it all behind you.

**Jack Ellis:** You toughed it out, there was no such thing as counseling or psychological evaluations, or anything like that, or, now, of course, the ministers were the ones that called if you lost someone. They were the ones, but no such thing as any kind of psychological counseling.

**Kim Cox:** Did the churches play a big part then, as far as, clothing and food...



**Jack Ellis:** Churches, ah, housed people, and raised clothing, yea people were staying in some of the churches here in town that had lost their homes, yes, and there were people who would come in and pay for places for, ah, my aunt and uncle ran the Midland Trail Hotel then, which was where Arby's is down through there, and they had a big hotel there, and, ah, there were people who came and stayed at the hotel and people would come and pay their room bill, some of the poor people then would have a place to stay.

331-344

**Kim Cox:** That was another thing I wanted to ask you, we talked earlier about the rebuilding, and, ah, for people that did not have the money, did the community just help them rebuild or did people just more in with other family members?

**Jack Ellis:** They moved in with other family members and they left here. I know of, there are many families, that, a few days after that flood, that just absolutely lost everything, that left here because this was at a time in 1939, that of course, we were in a recession, but, ah, really a depression, but things were beginning to improve in Ohio, and Indiana, Illinois, and people were going up there and getting jobs, and I know of several families that after the flood that they just left and never came back.

344-365

**Kim Cox:** Well, what was the factory in this town, was there a factory in the Morehead area, in the Clearfield area?

**Janis Ellis:** I guess Lee Clay.

**Jack Ellis:** Lee Clay Products it was a tile company.

**Kim Cox:** Was that like the big employer in the area at the time?

**Jack Ellis:** Yes, it was a big employer in this area, very much so, yes, in Morehead and right around here, "THE" big employer. They also blew their whistle, now, oh yea, I know what I started to tell you, the people that did survive the flood, many of them when their houses washed away and they had to swim out to survive, said if the train had not awoken them and also when they came out their house and their house, ah, broke up they could tell which way to go. If it had just been dark, they said they didn't have any orientation about which way to swim at all, and said by the train being there, not only did it warn them, but it helped them to orient themselves which way the hills were and the high grounds were.

**Janis Ellis:** Because of the lights.

**Jack Ellis:** Yea, because of the light, see it had it's lights shining up the railroad tracks, see the trains lights would go a long way. And it was shining all, it came around Brady curve and stopped and started shining, or it had it's light on and started blowing it's whistle and people

were able to orient themselves because of the light shining and they could go either way because of the light.

365-382

**Kim Cox:** Did the factory get hit by the flood, as well, was it located...

**Jack Ellis:** No, ah, now some of the factory houses over there did, they built those houses back, and they're are still over there by the side of the creek. No it was not hit it was above the flooded area.

**Kim Cox:** I just know, in reading about this it mentioned like the factory area and people living, you know in that area and we weren't even sure what kind of factory it was?

**Jack Ellis:** It was called Lee Clay.

**Janis Ellis:** There was a little railroad train that went up into the mountains and got the clay. It was a very well known plant.

**Jack Ellis:** They made sewer tile, they made flew tile and ,of course, in that day that was before plastic sewer pipes, so they were booming. That, everybody that put in sewers, they had those sewer tiles.

382-410

**Kim Cox:** Well, I really don't have anymore questions and if you can think of anything else you wanted to tell me about it.

**Janis Ellis:** I don't guess they had the government projects or monies to rebuild, like they do now.

**Kim Cox:** Just a few articles I've read talked like the Red Cross said to help the most in need, and, you know, the community was ask to come up with certain amounts of money, a little skit of persons that donated and I think they were ask, Rowan County was ask to come up with a thousand dollars. You know, the difference in what it cost ot replace. I know I looked at some articles, it was jsut advertisements shere the furniture sold, and for things like a refrigerator, it was like twenty dollars, you know, and that, it made sense why Rowan County was needed to come up with a thousand dollars, when today it would be hundreds of thousands of dollars.

**Janis Ellis:** It was probably just for food and clothing. They were just on their own to build their own places back.

**Jack Ellis:** Yea, your uncle was a builder and his house washed off. He built the old swimming pool up there, a lot of houses, nice houses. But I know of no help, except go to the bank.